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Viewing cable 09ISTANBUL78, TURKISH THINK TANK EXPERTS EXPOUND ON IRAN

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09ISTANBUL78	2009-02-26 10:34	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Consulate Istanbul

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/04/17/112290/state-department-cables-reveal.html>

VZCZCXRO3132
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDIR RUEHKUK
DE RUEHIT #0078/01 0571034
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 261034Z FEB 09
FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8792
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ISTANBUL 000078

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKISH THINK TANK EXPERTS EXPOUND ON IRAN

REF: A) ANKARA 284 B) 08 ISTANBUL 287

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk; Reason 1.5 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: We recently pulsed private Turkish experts for latest views on Turkey-Iran and US-Iran relations. The

most common themes we heard were: Turkey and Iran, as neighbors and rivals, both seek a stable "balance of power" with each other and usually pursue bilateral relations with that goal in mind; changing Iran's policies will require changing the regime's worldview "which won't come cheap" (and must include US respect for Iran's regional interests and influence); and Turkey can help the US and P5 1 talk to Iran.

End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Accompanied by visiting UNVIE Senior Advisor Andrea Hall (ref A), we met February 17 in Ankara for discussions on Turkey-Iran and US-Iran relations with Dr. Mustafa Kibaroglu (Bilkent University), Professor Meliha Altunisik (Middle East Technical University), Duygu Guvenc (Sabah newspaper), and Dr. Arif Keskin of the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM). We met February 18 in Istanbul with Ambassador Murat Bilhan, Dr. Vural Altin and Dr. Necmi Dayday of the Turkish-Asian Center for Strategic Studies (TASAM), Dr. Ercan Citlioglu and retired LTG Metin Yalcin from Bahcesehir University's Strategic Research Center, and Can Buharali of the Center for Political and Economic Studies (EDAM).

Offer More, Start Secretly, Let Turkey Help

¶3. (SBU) Kibaroglu, a leading academic on nonproliferation, said that P5 1 pressure and diplomacy can slow down Iran's nuclear program, but stopping it will require far more than has yet been offered. The 2006 offer does not address the regime's key needs: assurances of regime survival, and acceptance of Iran's leading role in the region. To the regime the benefits of a nuclear weapons capability outweigh the risks, especially now that the U.S. military option seems "off the table" and prospects for more UNSC sanctions in the near term seem remote. Moreover, the regime will never give up the "prestige" of an enrichment capability, though it may be persuaded to cap its capability at current levels. To convince the regime to negotiate, the P5 1 should speak more respectfully to Iran, raise international pressure on Iran as much as possible to hold talks, make clear that additional security-related incentives will be offered at the table, and enlist Turkey's help, including to initiate talks in secret. Kibaroglu asserted that "Iran trusts Turkey more than it does anyone else in the region" and underscored that Turkey's membership on the UNSC and the IAEA Board of Governors makes it well-suited to act as a facilitator of P5 1-Iran talks. Turkey has most to lose if Iran goes nuclear, Kibaroglu insisted; it should participate in finding a solution.

Change Iran's worldview, not just its nuclear program

¶4. (SBU) According to METU International Relations Department Chair Meliha Altunisik, Iran had high expectations for a conciliatory approach from the Obama administration, but recent indications suggest USG policy on Iran will not change dramatically. Complicating prospects for engagement is that the Iranian regime does not understand the USG's real "bottom line": Is it to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon, prevent Iran from mastering industrial-scale enrichment, or prevent Iran from retaining any enrichment capability at all? She urged the USG to clarify its Iran/nuclear redlines precisely. She expressed concern that other destabilizing Iranian policies (which also impact Turkey) like support for terrorism, rejection of Israel, and mischief in Iraq and Afghanistan might not be addressed as forcefully by P5 1 negotiators struggling to strike a workable nuclear deal with Iran. "The point of any deal should be to change the Iranian regime's worldview, not just its nuclear program." She also urged the USG to stop publicly using the terms "carrot and stick", explaining that Iranian officials believe the USG uses those terms out of intentional disrespect, to make Iran seem subservient.

¶5. (SBU) Altunisik probed on current USG thinking about how a future regional security arrangement involving Iran might work. She suggested building off of the "Iraq and Neighbors"

process, since the key regional actors already participate, and it is not "weighed down" by Arab-Israeli disputes. The Iraq Neighbors Process might be used to agree on regional security principles; identify mutual interests (e.g., fighting terrorism, piracy and drugs; addressing common environmental problems); and develop practical cooperation on the already-existing Ministerial tracks (e.g., among regional Finance Ministries, Interior Ministries, etc. but with Iran as the new focus instead of Iraq.

An Opposing View: Treat Iran Like "a Thief with a Gun"

¶ 6. (SBU) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, an Iranian Azeri and long-time Iran watcher, offered a pessimistic view of US-Iran relations in 2009, warning that if USG policy on Iran leans too much towards engagement and incentives and away from sanctions and the threat of military action we will make no progress in slowing Iran's quest for nuclear weapons. He suggested this has been a clear lesson of past interaction with Iran, pointing out that Iran stopped its weaponization activities in 2003 because it feared a U.S. attack in the wake of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. "For Iran's leaders to be convinced to do anything, they need to be scared." The regime is committed to developing a nuclear weapons capability to ensure that regional rivals (Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt) and the U.S. cannot threaten it. No package of incentives from the U.S. could offer Iran as much security as a nuclear weapon. Moreover, Keskin told us, the USG should stop focusing on Iran's presidential elections, since only Supreme Leader Khamenei will make final decisions about Iran-US relations. Even if Khamenei permits improved relations, no future President other than Ahmadinejad has enough credibility with hard-liners to win their full support. Thus, counter-intuitively, Ahmadinejad probably would be more useful in securing U.S. goals than Khatami. Moreover, "if you wait until June to talk you might as well wait until September, since Iran will say it needs that much time to assemble a new administration." Between now and June, Khamenei appears to have decided that Majles Speaker Larijani should represent regime views to the international community, rather than Ahmadinejad, FM Mottaki, or SNSC Secretary Jalili.

¶ 7. (SBU) Once the USG is ready to meet with Iran, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX reiterated, Washington should be prepared for a long, difficult process. "You cannot end a 30-year long crisis in confidence in a few months or even a few years," by which time Iran will have acquired a nuclear weapons capability. "Everyone in Iran thinks this is the year for the nuclear program." XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX likened Iran to a thief with a gun: "He knows the gun may save his life or it may make someone else kill him. Iran must be made to understand that if he does not drop the gun, he will be killed."

Address Iran's many grievances and fears

¶ 8. (SBU) TASAM Vice Chairman (and former Ambassador) Bilhan and TASAM experts underscored Turkey's opposition to a nuclear weapons capable Iran. They pointed to Iran's many grievances against the US as evidence that the US must restore trust with the regime before diplomacy can succeed. Iran needs confidence it will have guaranteed access to nuclear fuel in exchange for suspending its enrichment program, for example. Its negative experience with EUROTHERM in the 1980s convinced it not to trust such arrangements. Iran wants to see more pressure on Israel to join the NPT. Iran also worries that if it "comes clean" about a past nuclear weapons program the US would use that admission as grounds for military action. TASAM experts urged the U.S. to stop issuing threats and instead use soft power, confidence-building gestures, and incentives to bring Iran to the negotiating table. Bilhan's contacts with Iranian counterparts (including Iranian MFA think tank director Mousavi, ref B) lead him to believe that Iran would be willing to negotiate on the level of enrichment that it could retain under strictest IAEA safeguards, but it would not agree to dismantle its program completely.

¶ 9. (SBU) TASAM experts surmised that even if Iran eventually achieved the ability to build a crude nuclear device, it would probably not use it, nor would Iran be able to mount it on a sophisticated delivery system for another decade or more. As a result, Turkey does not consider Iran's nuclear program to be an imminent threat. Turkey and Iran are regional rivals with roughly comparable military forces, but neither currently threatens (or has designs against) each other's vital interests. On the other hand, Bilhan added, the Gulf Arab states do see Iran's nuclear program, as well as its conventional forces, as an imminent threat. Their fears also must be addressed by P5 1 diplomacy.

Count on Ahmadinejad's re-election; Stay out of ethnic politics

¶ 10. (SBU) Citlioglu predicted that Russia and China will continue to block tougher UNSC sanctions on Iran in 2009, even if the USG engages with Iran without preconditions but Iran still stalls. He also urged that the USG press Israel to stay in the background as P5 1 efforts with Iran evolve, since "Israel can have a very negative impact" on US-Iran engagement. Citlioglu said Iran's presidential elections will not influence the regime's approach to talks with the P5 1. "It doesn't matter who wins. Khamenei and the mullahs will still make the decisions." He speculated that Khamenei will decide to fully endorse Ahmadinejad, ensuring his victory, because "a non-clerical president is less of a threat to him." Citlioglu noted that the USG decision to sanction the PJAK as a terrorist group under Executive Order 13224 will be seen positively by Iran, but he warned against the U.S. destroying that goodwill by supporting other restive ethnic movements in Iran, like the Azeris, citing local news reports of US efforts to instigate Azeri unrest in northwest Iran.

¶ 11. (SBU) Both Citlioglu and Yalcin claimed that if Iran develops nuclear weapons capability Turkey would also move quickly to do so, to maintain the balance of power. Egypt and Saudi Arabia would also seek the capability, they speculated, though Turkey would oppose that because it would disrupt rather than solidify that balance. The only way to get Iran to the negotiating table is through increased pressure. The only way to secure Iran's agreement to stop pursuing nuclear weapons is to change the regime's worldview by convincing the regime that the US is not a threat to its survival, and by offering cooperation in areas important to the regime (and to Turkey), like counter-narcotics and fighting Kurdish/PJAK terrorism.

Iran only hears what it wants to hear

¶ 12. (SBU) EDAM Board member Can Buharali (a former Turkish diplomat once stationed in Iran) offered from experience that "Iran hears what it wants to hear" and rarely responds constructively to criticism or threats. That is why Turkey avoids criticizing Iran in public: doing so only loses influence with Iran and makes Turkey seem like a USG proxy, without moderating the regime. But when Turkey explains to Iran privately that a nuclear weapons-capable Iran would be a threat to Turkey's vital national interests, Iranian leaders appear to listen. Turkey must strike a balance, however, by also making clear its support for Iran's and all countries' NPT Article IV rights to peaceful nuclear technology.

¶ 13. (SBU) Buharali doubted that USG engagement with Iran before the June elections would be useful to either side. But a goodwill gesture from the USG to the next Iranian president shortly after his election (even if it is Ahmadinejad) would be viewed positively by Khamenei and could lead Iran back to the negotiating table. Once at the table, Iran will expect the USG to formally recognize the regime's legitimate status and legitimate regional interests. "All Iranian leaders want that, from hard-liners to reformists." The nuclear program, however, is not a bargaining chip, it is

"a national goal." Iran may be willing to agree on stringent measures to give assurances it would not weaponize, but it will never give up the enrichment capability that it has worked so hard to achieve, he assessed. On the other hand, Iran wants desperately to re-establish relations with the US and secure a full lifting of sanctions, which have stunted its hydrocarbon sector. Iran thinks it can "have it both ways": keeping an enrichment capability while getting the US to lift sanctions. Buharali warned that Iran "buys time and stalls very well." Some hard-liners still want Iran to stall until after it has clearly enriched enough uranium for a future nuclear weapon, and then negotiate from a position of greater strength. As the USG considers whether and when to engage, Buharali urged that it continue to reach out to the Iranian population -- "a key U.S. stakeholder" -- both in Iran and abroad, and continue to support civil society development in Iran, "but not behind the regime's back." Instead, he suggested offering developmental and humanitarian assistance openly, either through UN agencies or even directly to and through the Iranian government itself.

Comment

¶14. (C) These academic and think-tank colleagues all follow Iranian affairs closely, have lived in Iran or traveled recently to Iran, and maintain contacts with Iranian counterparts. We thus find their views on Iran to be credible and well-informed, especially with regard to the most commonly-recurring themes: Turkey and Iran seek a stable balance of power with each other and almost always pursue bilateral relations with that goal in mind; moderating Iran's policies will require genuinely convincing the regime that the USG does not seek its overthrow and indeed accepts an influential role for Iran in the region; and Turkey understands Iran better than the U.S. does and is prepared to help us engage. It is also noteworthy where our expert interlocutors disagreed, for example on the timing of possible engagement, or what level of further international pressure on the regime would help bring it to the table. This simply reflects that even to a Turkish expert on Iran, the inner workings, levers, and pressure points of the Iranian regime remain largely a mystery. End comment.

WIENER